Fairbury Businessman and Township Official

By: Dale C. Maley
For: FairburyNews.net
Date: May 23, 2022

Herbert C. "Bert" Slaughter, son of Stephen Slaughter, owned several Fairbury businesses and was the Indian Grove Assessor for 34 years. Bert lived part of his life in the "Little Castle" house at 608 East Ash Street, southeast of the High School.

The story of Bert Slaughter began when his father moved the family from Tremont to Fairbury in 1884. After they moved to Fairbury, eight-year-old Bert Slaughter started to attend Fairbury schools. Bert Slaughter graduated with the Class of 1897 from Fairbury Township High School. The Class of 1897 only had nine graduates. These nine graduates were Leslie D. Baird, Bert C. Slaughter, Lucretia Dimmick, Francis F. Moran, Ella F. Jones, Bessie C. Cramer, Anna S. Garber, Pearl Moates, and Jessie C. Cramer.

The graduation ceremony was held at the Fairbury Opera House, located at the northwest corner of Locust and Fifth Streets. That Opera House was built in 1870 and burned down in 1974. Bert was the featured speaker at graduation and gave a speech where he predicted what the world would be like in 1997, one-hundred years in the future. Several of Bert's predictions have come true.

Also, in 1897, the Rockwood family moved to Fairbury from Gibson City. Fourteen-year-old Gertrude Rockwood started to attend Fairbury Township High School. After graduation, Bert acquired knowledge of photography and became an expert in that field. Bert took a financial interest in a photographic business.

In 1898, Bert sold his Fairbury photography business, and he then bought a gallery at Odell. Two years later, Bert sold the Odell gallery at a significant profit. Bert then accepted a job with Sweet, Wallach & Co. This Chicago company manufactured and distributed photo stock and supplies in the Midwest. Bert was initially very successful as an inside salesman working from the company office. Because of this success, Bert was sent out as a traveling salesman for six years, covering the states of Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Ohio.

In the 1900 U.S. Census, twenty-three-year-old Bert Slaughter lived on Elm Street with his parents and sister Emma Slaughter. Bert listed his occupation as a photographer. In 1902, Gertrude Rockwood graduated from Fairbury Township High School.

In 1904, while Bert was a traveling salesman, he was held up and robbed near Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. He was going to his hotel room when he was seized from behind by one man while another man pressed a revolver against his head. The robbers took $35 in cash, a diamond ring valued at $225, and his watch.

After being a traveling salesman for six years and being robbed in Chicago, Bert quit his job and decided to settle down in Fairbury. He married Miss Gertrude E. Rockwood in 1906. Miss Rockwood was a native of Illinois. Her father, Ralph W. Rockwood, was the Walton Brothers' Grocery department manager. He was 29, and she was 22 when they married. They had two sons, Ralph Edward and Harry Bruce Slaughter.

In 1907, Bert Slaughter and Ro Bartlett organized the Illinois Card & Novelty Co. of Fairbury. They began business with machinery propelled entirely by foot power. All of their presses were later upgraded to be operated by electricity. Their job printing office was supplied with all kinds of up-to-date machinery necessary for their business. The company printed and manufactured cards and calendars and offered photo supplies. This business was very successful and grew rapidly.

In the 1910 Census, Bert and Gertrude Slaughter lived with their son Ralph on First Street. They owned their home, and Bert's occupation was a commercial salesman of novelties. Gertrude Slaughter was an active member of the Lo Zang club. This group was a bridge card-playing club that raised money and supported various Fairbury charitable causes.

In the 1920 Census, the Bert Slaughter family lived on East Elm Street. Bert's widowed mother, Elva Slaughter, also lived with the family. Unfortunately, Gertrude Slaughter died in 1927, and she was only 43 years old. She was buried in Graceland Cemetery.

By 1925, Bert owned another business named Slaughter's Radio Shop. He was the exclusive dealer for Atwater-Kent, Erla, Gilfillan, and Freshman Masterpiece radio receivers.

In 1929, Bert Slaughter married Cora M. Ele. Bert was 52, and Cora was 46 years old when they married. In 1930, the Bert Slaughter family lived at 110 East Elm Street. The household included Bert, his second wife Cora, his mother Elva, and his son Harry Slaughter. In the 1930 Census, Bert listed his occupation as township assessor. Bert was the Indian Grove assessor for 34 years.

In 1937, Elva Slaughter, mother of Bert Slaughter, died at the age of 84. She was buried with her husband at Graceland Cemetery. According to the 1939 Fairbury telephone book, Bert Slaughter moved to the brick home at 608 East Ash. This house still stands today and is often called the "Little Castle" house. Thomas Dizy George was the mason who built the Thomas A. Beach "Lion House" in 1872 on East Hickory Street. According to real estate tax records, the Little Castle house was built in 1870. One report in the Pontiac Daily Leader reported that T. D. George was the builder of the Beach house and the Little Castle house.

In the 1940 Census, Bert Slaughter was 63 years old, and he reported his occupation as a car insurance salesman. The 1959 Fairbury telephone book lists Bert Slaughter as still living at 608 East Ash Street. In 1960, Bert's second wife, Cora Slaughter, died at the age of 77. Cora was buried with her first husband, Charles A. States, in Indiana.

The 1962 phone book reports that Bert Slaughter moved to 606 East Ash, in the center of the block where the Little Castle house stands. Bert Slaughter died in 1969 at the age of 93. He was buried at Graceland Cemetery with his first wife, Gertrude Slaughter.

Bert Slaughter was an enterprising man who started several businesses in Fairbury. He was the Indian Grove township assessor for 34 years. Bert also lived in the iconic Little Castle house at 608 East Ash for about 20 years.

"Little Castle" house at 608 East Ash Street built in 1870. Bert Slaughter lived in this house from approximately 1939 until 1961.